

Plants and Parrots – a personal perspective



I am not a toxicologist or a professional horticulturist; just a long time gardener who has fallen in love with parrots. Over the last few years I have gathered information about plants and parrots. My search for ways to incorporate plants and gardening into the lives of my parrots is not finished, but I have reached a place where I feel that I have enough information to form some opinions and be comfortable allowing my parrots to play and chew on a number of plants. I would like to share the results of my search.

At the end are some web sites with extensive listings of toxic and safe plants and other related material. (With sincere thanks to all of the authors who contributed to my education!) These, just a few of the sites that are out there, I have found particularly helpful and reliable. Even so, you will see some differences among the lists. It is best to avoid any plant that is on the toxic side of any list, until you learn the reason why the plant is sometimes considered toxic and sometimes safe. Then, you can decide if your intended use of that plant will be safe for your feathered friends. *Note: A last minute “Google” search turned up a site that includes four plants I have considered safe on the “unsafe” list. They are indicated with an asterisk(*). For myself, I will continue to use these plants because of my personal experience and the fact that the lists I have learned to rely on consider them to be safe.*

But, *please*, after you are read the materials, make your own decisions based on your individual parrots and how comfortable you are with the issues involved. This handout is a thumbnail sketch of some basic principles I have found and I hope it will be a helpful beginning for you.

Basic Principles are: The plant itself must not be toxic to parrots. The plant should be free of pesticides, especially systemic ones. Soil should not have chemical additives, such as slow release fertilizer, or be must be completely inaccessible to the parrot. Containers should be made of material that is not toxic to parrots or be out of reach. Location and placement of a plant is important for your parrot’s safety and the survival of the plant, unless you consider the plant disposable.

Safe Plants include some common and easily grown plants such as: spider plant, jade, corn plant*, dracaena*, pony tail palm, impatiens*, Swedish ivy, snap dragon, hibiscus*, and nasturtium. Some vegetables (kales, edible flowering cabbage) are attractive and nutritious.

Some plants are part safe and part dangerous. The leaves and stems of plants that produce safe and healthy fruits, such as the tomato and its relatives, mango, peaches, plums and cherries are toxic. Some plants that are not toxic can cause physical injury. Young citrus plants and bougainvilleas have sharp thorns. The thorns can be removed.

Accurate identification of a plant is important. Many plants have a variety of common names. So, check for the scientific name. You can “Google” to find plant identification sites or catalogues that show pictures.

Branches from woody plants, shrubs and trees make fun perches and stands. Lilac, butterfly bush, dogwood, birch, pine, poplar, and willows are excellent sources. Outside plants need special preparation to make sure bugs, bird droppings and other contaminants that may harm parrots have been removed. There are a number of approaches. (See references.) Grapefruit seed extract (GSE), Oxyfresh Gele, and vinegar are recommended

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cleaning agents. Scrub, rinse, and dry. A note on pine: the sticky sap can mess up feathers, so peel the bark and let the branches age until they are no longer sticky.

Pesticides can make a safe plant dangerous. You can grow plants from seed or take your own cuttings. When you buy plants, ask the nursery about the use of pesticides. Once you have healthy plants established, a good spray with water keeps many pests off. (Parrots can enjoy a shower at the same time, weather permitting.) In



the summer when my plants go outside or on the porch, the good bug population (ladybugs and the like) take over the job. At your discretion, you may decide you need to use some of the natural insecticides based on garlic, hot peppers and the like. Make sure your parrot does not breathe the vapors if you spray your plants.

The soil in which plants grow can pose a danger. My personal choice is to use soil made of natural materials without chemical fertilizers. Identifying such soils and sources is not always easy. Ask and read labels carefully. Be aware that soils might be safe for mammals, but may contain materials that are not safe for parrots. There are recipes for making potting soil using peat moss or coconut fiber, perlite or vermiculite, and compost. I assume that ornamental plants have chemical fertilizer in the soil and buy very small plants, gently shake off the soil and repot in my preferred mixture.

Access to the soil can be limited in a number of ways, remembering that soil needs air to remain healthy. Well cleaned stones and rocks, a plastic mesh cover placed over the top of the soil are some ideas. Also, plant location (more later) can keep a parrot out of the dirt.

Mold and fungus are dangerous. Appropriately watered plants are not supposed to develop these diseases...but...things happen. One preventative is adding grapefruit seed extract to the water every so often. I water plants with a solution (10-15 drops GSE per gallon) every two or three weeks. If fungus or mold develops, remove the plant from any area in which the parrot will be or is a source of air it will breathe, and destroy or decontaminate the plant and soil.

Containers for plants, as with soil, should be made of material that is a “safe chew” or be inaccessible to the curious beak.

Location, location, location is important and will set the parameters, if not dictate, how you approach soil, container and other safety issues. Using plants in a parrot’s environment is a type of toy, so: Know your parrot! So far, my parrot gardening presumes supervision, except for a plant that is hung close enough to the cage so a stem or leaf, but not the container, can be nibbled at leisure. Lord Grayson can fly, but his main interest is hanging on his “boing” or sitting on the edge of a pot chewing flowers or greenery. Lady Scarlett would devour



everything in reach, but cannot fly, so I position perches close to the plant parts that can tolerate her pruning. Sometimes though, she is so intent on some morsel just out of her reach that she falls in a pot. I rescue her, wash her off and put her back on the perch. And the little guys can get right in the middle of things!



If you have a bird room or aviary where your parrots are out of their cages without your presence, incorporating plants is a bigger challenge. The principles are the same, but the precautions that need to be taken are much greater. If you have hanging plants, could the bird become tangled in the rope or wire? Do you plan to alternate plants to recover from serious pruning? One idea would be to put the plants in cages, with stems, branches and leaves extending out into the parrot's space.

If you have an outdoor aviary, butterfly bush, snowball (viburnum), pussy willow, forsythia or other parrot-safe vigorous hardy bushes could be planted in the aviary. By mid-summer these shrubs always need pruning. Give your birds a job! Grape vines are fun and safe. Tropical plants, hibiscus and palms, for example, can be set out during the summer in large pots in colder climates. Stand a large clay pipe on end, fill it with soil and add some greens.



I can't believe you ate greens!

Last, but not least, have fun!



Lady Scarlett keeps jade trimmed.



Lady S. reaches for a dracaena.



Lord G. eats Hibiscus

References and Resources

Lists of safe and toxic plants:

<http://www.birdsnways.com/articles/plntsafe.htm>
<http://www.birdsnways.com/articles/plntstox.htm>
<http://www.plannedparrothood.com/plants.html>
<http://www.exoticbird.com/gillian/plants.html>
<http://www.holisticbird.org/envir/plants.htm>
<http://www.petbirdbreeder.com/safeplants.htm>
<http://www.petbirdbreeder.com/toxicplants.htm>
<http://www.avianweb.com/safefoods.html>

Discussion of use of plants as well as identification of safe and harmful plants:

<http://www.landofvos.com/electus.html> (Kitchen Physician and other articles)
<http://exoticedibles.com/>

Branches and wood:

http://www.mdvaden.com/bird_page.shtml
<http://www.birdsafe.com/woods.htm>
<http://www.exoticbird.com/gillian/perch.html>

Common and scientific names:

<http://envhort.ucdavis.edu/ce/king/PoisPlant/SAFE-COM.htm>
http://www.bonsai-bci.com/species/common_index.html
<http://www.ansci.cornell.edu/plants/index.html>

Discussion group of parrot, amphibian, reptile owners:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ExoticPetsGardening/>

A wealth of information about sustainable agriculture, including information on soils:

<http://www.attra.ncat.org/>

Aviary Resources (a sample of what is out there)

Article about using nylon sports netting: <http://www.parrotchronicles.com/winter2001/feature2.htm>

Stainless wire/mesh source: <http://www.pwrconcepts.com/asbi.html>; <http://www.twpinc.com>

Stainless steel fasteners: www.thenuttycompany.com

Cages By Design - <http://www.cagesbydesign.com/default.asp>

Corners Limited - <http://www.cornerslimited.com/>

Expandable Habitats - <http://www.expandablehabitats.com/custom.htm>

Back yard Aviaries - <http://www.backyardaviary.com/>; <http://birdstheword.com/birds/flight.htm>

Discussion group - <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/naturalbird/>

Section on Aviaries in "Parrot Enrichment and Activity Book," by Kris Porter, a file on Phoenix Landing's Yahoo Group

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